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AUTHOR	Light, Richard L.
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ABSTRACT

Four nonstandard linguistic features used by five black children, ages 6-11 years, in 14 conversations were recorded and transcribed. The interviewers included male and female adults, Negro and white. The four nonstandard linguistic features were multiple negation, and absence of the Z suffixes marking noun plural, possession, and the third person singular form of the verb. Results of the study show that the use of the nonstandard features depended upon: (1) the age of the child, with the youngest child reflecting a 75% occurrence, whereas the other four children showed a 28% average; (2) the presence or absence of adult interviewers, the absence of an interviewer correlating with a higher percentage of nonstandard features; and (3) the sex and race of the interviewer, with a white interviewer alone correlating with a lower percentage (21%) and a Negro interviewer correlating with a higher percentage (36%), and with the presence of a "familiar" white female correlating with a higher percentage of nonstandard forms (31%) than the presence of a white male (12%). The tapes and transcriptions of these 14 conversations are available at the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C. (DB)

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SOME OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING BLACK CHILDRENS' CONVERSATIONS

Richard L. Light

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Studies over the past decade have convincingly demonstrated the value of studying language within social and situational contexts. By relating

Dr. Richard L. Light is Assistant Professor in the English as a Second Language Program at State University of New York at Albany. He is director of a teacher training project in bilingual education supported by the United States Office of Education and is currently studying the language of lower socioeconomic group children in the Albany area under a SUNY Research Foundation grant.

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linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena, such studies have discovered regularity in speech fluctuations that were previously either ignored or dismissed as free variation. The purpose of this study is to quantify variations in four speech features in the conversations of five black children, and to determine how these might correlate with extra-linguistic factors in fourteen interview situations.

The five black children in the fourteen conversations considered here are from a lower socioeconomic group in Washington, D. C. The speech of these children, ages 6-11, was recorded and transcribed in various settings involving adults of different races as interviewers.[1] The four nonstandard linguistic features used by the children and examined in the fourteen interviews with them are multiple negation, and absence of the Z suffixes marking noun plural, possession, and the third person singular form of the verb.[2] Extra-linguistic variables considered are presence or absence of an adult participant-interviewer, sex and race of the adults, and age of the children. For each linguistic feature, three tables are provided. One shows distribution of the feature throughout the conversations and indicates the children and interviewers involved in each; one gives a summary of the features used by each child in all conversations, and one shows features used correlated with characteristics of adult interviewers in the conversations. A summary indicates percentages of the four nonstandard features occurring in the speech of each child in all conversations, and shows percentages of the features used correlated with characteristics of the adult interviewers. Finally, some notes of interest to the classroom teacher are included.

The Plural Suffix

Table 1 gives an outline of all nouns with the potential of being marked with the plural suffix which occur in the corpus.[3] "Potential of being marked" here means that the marking is grammatically possible. The unmarked occurrences are limited to 22, or 7% of a potential of 303. And of this unmarked 7% only 1% is "potentially non-redundant," and thus possibly ambiguous. That is, if the noun were marked in the case of this 1% (column IX on Table 1) it would not be redundant. Redundant here means that there is some indication of number other than the plural suffix in a noun phrase, e.g., *five pencils, some books,* etc. Thus in all conversa-

[1] The source of the data for this study (excerpted from the writer's unpublished doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University, 1969, © 1970) is **Conversations in a Negro American Dialect,** recorded and transcribed by Bengt Loman (Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1967).

[2] The use of such socially significant nonstandard features is not, of course, limited to black children, any more than standard features are limited to whites. For some characteristics of white nonstandard speech see William Labov, **A Study of the Nonstandard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City,** Cooperative Research Project No. 3288, 2 Vols. (New York: Columbia University, 1968), I, **passim,** but especially pp. 41, 146, 275-278.

[3] Throughout the paper, the following reference are made to adult participants with the children in the conversations:
"Negro male" refers to either of two brothers of approximately the same age (32 and 39) in two conversations with the children
"Negro female" refers to the 39 year old mother of one of the children, and/or to a younger black research assistant.
"White male" refers to Bengt Loman, the principal investigator.
"White female" refers to a young research assistant.
"Negro and white females" refers to the two research assistants.
"No adult interviewer" indicates that there were no adult participants in the conversations.

A notation such as (121 MJ) indicates that the speech feature so marked occurred on page 121 in the Loman text and was used by MJ. Ages and sex of the five children are indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 1
MARKED AND UNMARKED NOUN PLURALS AND
CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWERS

adult participants		conversation number	child	nouns marked for plural			unmarked		unmarked totals	total plural potential	percentages of potential marked
race	sex			redundant	non-redundant	totals marked	potentially redundant	potentially non-redundant			
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Negro	F	1	GJ	4	2	6	5	1	6	12	50
			MJ	2	1	3	2	∅	2	5	60
		3	AP	6	∅	6	∅	∅	∅	6	100
			JD	8	4	12	∅	1	1	13	92
White	M	2	JD	4	16	20	∅	∅	∅	20	100
			MJ	3	15	18	∅	∅	∅	18	100
No adult interviewer		5	JD	1	3	4	1	∅	1	5	80
			BS	3	1	4	5	∅	5	9	45
White	F	4	AP	6	1	7	∅	∅	∅	7	100
			GJ	..... no potential plurals							
			JD	11	5	16	∅	2	2	18	89
			MJ	9	3	12	∅	∅	∅	12	100
Negro & White	F	6	MJ	4	15	19	∅	∅	∅	19	100
Negro	F	7	JD	10	13	23	∅	∅	∅	23	100
		8	GJ	∅	28	28	1	∅	1	29	97
Negro	M	9	MJ	2	7	9	∅	∅	∅	9	100
		10	GJ	7	9	16	1	∅	1	17	94
White	F	11	MJ	11	4	15	1	∅	1	16	94
		12	GJ	17	19	36	1	1	2	38	95
		13	JD	5	7	12	∅	∅	∅	12	100
		14	AP	11	4	15	∅	∅	∅	15	100
Totals:				124	157	281	17	5	22	303	
Percentages of Column XI:				41%	52%	93%	6%	1%	7%	100%	93%

tions taken together the vast majority (93%) of the nouns with potential for plural marking were so marked, the majority (77%) of unmarked nouns were in phrases which would have made the marking redundant, and only small minority (1%) were in fact ambiguous.

Although the plural marker was present in 93% of the cases where it was potentially present in the conversations as a whole, there were two conversations in which this percentage was considerably lower.

In conversation #1, the only one which involved two boys and a female Negro interviewer, only 55% of the potential was marked. The children in this conversation appeared to be relaxed, and their speech included the most spontaneous and aggressive exchanges of any of the interviews. It might be suggested that in the informal atmosphere of this conversation, the only one in which two boys are the only peers present, the children employed forms more nearly typical of the speech they normally use with their peers alone.

In the other conversation in which significant percentages of potential plurals were not marked (conversation #5) at least two factors may be tentatively considered as likely influences. First, there was no adult immediately present; none participated in the conversation. Second, one of the children was only six years old, at least four years younger than any of the other children in the conversations. Less than half of the potential plurals in this six-year-old's speech were marked, a much lower percentage than for any of the other children.

It can be suggested then that the factors of both age and situation affect the use of plural markers by the children in these conversations.

Table 2 shows the percentage of marked plurals used by each child, and Table 3 shows the percentage used with sex and race of the interviewers as the variable.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGES OF PLURALS MARKED, BY CHILD

Child	BS	GJ	MJ	JD	AP
Age	6	10	10	11	10
Sex	F	M	M	F	F
Potential Plurals	9	96	79	91	28
Percentage Marked	45	89	92	93	100

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGES OF PLURALS MARKED, BY INTERVIEWERS

Interviewers Present	None	Negro female	Negro and White females	White female	Negro male	White male
Potential Plurals	14	88	19	118	26	38
Percentage Marked	62	83	96	97	97	100

Although there appear to be significant differences in the marking of plurals depending both upon age and upon interview situation, in some cases the corrrelations must be considered tentative because of the small number of tokens. In the speech of BS for example, there were only nine

potential plurals, four of which were marked and five unmarked. However, JD marked only 80% of the potential plurals in this situation, and there does appear to be enough indication of a negative correlation between percentage of plurals marked and the absence of an interviewer to warrant further investigation.

Third Person Singular

Potential for this marker was considered only for main verbs in affirmative statements, e.g., *John like it* was counted as a potential for third singular marker, but *do John like it* was not.

There were a total of sixty-eight potential occurrences of the third person singular marker; only sixteen percent of them were marked. The breakdown of occurrences is shown in Table 4. Table 5 shows that the percentage of third person singular marker usage by child varied between 25 and 15 percent, except for the youngest child who did not mark any

TABLE 4
THIRD PERSON SINGULAR

Adult interviewers		conversation			
race	sex	number	child	marked	unmarked
Negro	F	1	GJ	Ø	1
			MJ	Ø	Ø
		3	AP	Ø	1
			JD	1	Ø
White	M	2	JD	1	Ø
			MJ	Ø	2
no adult interviewer		5	JD	Ø	Ø
			BS	Ø	11
White	F	4	AP	Ø	2
			GJ	Ø	Ø
			JD	Ø	5
			MJ	Ø	Ø
Negro and White	F	6	MJ	3	5
Negro	F	7	JD	Ø	1
		8	GJ	2	2
Negro	M	9	MJ	Ø	3
		10	GJ	1	5
White	F	11	MJ	1	7
		12	GJ	Ø	4
		13	JD	Ø	5
		14	AP	2	3
			Totals:	11	57
			Percentages:	16%	84%

verbs for third singular. There was also considerable variation in percentages marked depending upon the adult interviewer present as indicated on Table 6. However, because of the small potential for marking and other factors, this can be taken only as a suggestion of the possible effect of different interview situations. For example, in the column with "none" indicated for interviewer, the eleven potentials for marking the verb for third singular in this situation were all in the speech of the youngest child; this is the only conversation in which she takes part. It is therefore not possible to isolate either age of the child or race and sex characteristics of the interviewer alone as the variable accounting for the complete lack of the third person singular suffix in the child's speech.

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGES OF THIRD PERSON SINGULAR MARKED, BY CHILD

Child	AP	GJ	MJ	JD	BS
Age	10	10	10	11	6
Sex	F	M	M	F	F
Potential	8	15	21	13	11
Percentage Marked	25	20	19	15	∅

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGES OF THIRD PERSON SINGULAR MARKED, BY INTERVIEWER

Interviewers Present	None	White female	Negro male	White male	Negro female	Negro and White female
Potential	11	29	9	3	8	8
Percentage Marked	∅	10	11	33	38	38

The marking of the third singular was not limited to any small set of verbs; nine of the eleven verbs so marked were different. And except for the fact that all children marked a small percentage of the third singular potential (from ∅% to 25% depending upon the child) no clear pattern of such marking emerged. One child even switched from unmarked to marked third singular in the same sentence:

we wen' on na thing da' *go* down an' den *goes* right back aroun' (121 MJ)

Possessives

Table 7 outlines the use of possessive suffixes in the conversations.

TABLE 7
POSSESSIVES

Adult participants race	sex	conv. number	child	possessive suffix present	possessive suffix not present
Negro	F	1	GJ	2	Ø
			MJ	Ø	3
		3	AP	Ø	Ø
			JD	Ø	Ø
White	M	2	JD	2	Ø
			MJ	1	Ø
No adult interviewer		5	JD	Ø	Ø
			BS	3	1
White	F	4	AP	Ø	Ø
			GJ	Ø	Ø
			JD	7	Ø
			MJ	Ø	Ø
Negro and White	F	6	MJ	Ø	Ø
Negro	F	7	JD	3	Ø
		8	GJ	Ø	Ø
Negro	M	9	MJ	Ø	1
		10	GJ	4	Ø
White	F	11	MJ	Ø	2
		12	GJ	1	1
		13	JD	Ø	1
		14	AP	Ø	Ø
		Totals:		23	9
		Percentage with possessive suffix present		72%	

Table 8 shows a breakdown of the use of the possessive suffix by child and Table 9 by characteristics of adult interviewers. The possessive suffix was regularly used by all children except MJ to mark nouns for possession. MJ marked possession with the suffix only once in seven potential occurrences. He regularly used sentences such as

you got Harry Lee tennis ba' (5 MJ)

Three other children, including the youngest, regularly used the possessive suffix; there was one child with no potential for its use in the corpus. The only corrrelation here then is absence of the suffix with the speech of a single child.

TABLE 8
POSSESSIVE SUFFIX, BY CHILD

Child	JD	GJ	BS	MJ	AP
Age	11	10	6	10	10
Sex	F	M	F	M	F
Potential	13	8	4	7	no potential
Marked	12	7	3	1	—
Percentage Marked	92	88	75	14	—

TABLE 9
POSSESSIVE SUFFIX, BY INTERVIEWER

Interviewers	White male	Negro male	none	White female	Negro female	Negro and White female
Potential	3	5	4	12	8	no potential
Marked	3	4	3	8	5	—
Percentage Marked	100	80	75	67	63	—

Multiple Negation

Negative sentences in the corpus were examined for instances of multiple negation, that is, the realization of a negative element both in an auxiliary verb and in an indefinite pronoun (e.g., *nobody, nothing*, etc.), an adverb (*never, hardly*, etc.), or an indefinite determiner (*a, any*, etc.). Multiple negation involves up to three negative elements in a single sentence in the corpus as in:

ain' nobody in ne house gave me not'n' (124 MJ)

Following the procedure used by Shuy,[4] negatives co-occurring with indefinites were tabulated. The "potential occurrences" of multiple negation (e.g., *dey ain't show a movie* 155 AP) as well as "actual" or "realized" occurrences (*you ain' got no notebook* 2 GJ) were totaled and entered in column V on Table 10. The actual occurrences of multiple negation were entered in column VI. The percentages of "actual" multiple negatives in relation to "potential" multiple negatives was then computed and entered in column VII. There were a total of 53 realizations of multiple negation in a potential of 64 occurrences. Thus 83% of the potential for multiple negation was realized in the corpus.

[4] Roger Shuy, Walter Wolfram, and William Riley, **Linguistic Correlates of Social Stratification in Detroit Speech**, Cooperative Research Project, No. 6-1347 (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1967), Part III, p. 9.

TABLE 10
MULTIPLE NEGATION

Adult interviewers race	sex	conv. number	child	potential occurrence	realized	percentage realized
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Negro	F	1	GJ	10	6	60
			MJ	2	1	50
		3	AP	no potential		—
			JD	1	1	100
White	M	2	JD	3	1	33
			MJ	3	3	100
No adult interviewer		5	JD	1	1	100
			BS	4	4	100
White	F	4	GJ	no potential		—
			AP	2	2	100
			JD	1	1	100
			MJ	1	1	100
Negro and White	F	6	MJ	no potential		—
Negro	F	7	JD	9	9	100
		8	GJ	2	1	50
Negro	M	9	MJ	4	4	100
		10	GJ	1	1	100
White	F	11	MJ	8	8	100
		12	GJ	4	3	75
		13	JD	3	3	100
		14	AP	5	3	60
			Totals:	64	53	
			Percentage Realized:			83%

Tables 11 and 12 give a breakdown of the number of potential occurrences of multiple negation and percentages realized, by child and by situation. The highest percentage of multiple negation was in the speech of the youngest child. However, because of the small number of potential occurrences (only four), this can only be taken as a tentative indication of a positive correlation between younger age and multiple negation. The highest percentages of multiple negation occurred with the Negro male as interviewer and in the one conversation with no interviewer present. Somewhat surprisingly the next highest percentage occurred with a white, not a black, female as interviewer. A partial explanation for this might be that she was very well known by the children and they appeared to be as relaxed in her presence as with a black interviewer. This is illustrated when at one point a child mistakenly addresses her using the name of a female Negro interviewer. (121 MJ). This relaxed atmosphere was not apparent in conversations involving the white male interviewer; conversations in which he was present show the lowest percentage of multiple negation correlated with interviewer characteristics.

TABLE 11
MULTIPLE NEGATION, BY CHILD

Child	BS	MJ	JD	AP	GJ
Age	6	10	11	10	10
Sex	F	M	F	F	M
Potential	4	18	18	7	17
Percentage Realized	100	94	88	71	64

TABLE 12
MULTIPLE NEGATION, BY INTERVIEWERS

Interviewers Present	None	Negro male	White female	Negro female	White male	Negro and White females
Potential	5	5	24	24	6	no potential
Percentage Realized	100	100	87	75	66	—

Summary

Tables 13 and 14 summarize the percentages of all nonstandard features considered. Table 13 summarizes them according to the child who used them and Table 14 by the presence or absence of adult interviewers and by interviewer characteristics.

For the four features considered, the absence of an adult interviewer participating in the conversations (column I, Table 14) correlated with a higher average percentage of non-standard realizations. For two of the four features (third singular marker and multiple negation), such non-standard realization was one hundred percent. However, the youngest child involved in the conversations was present in this one conversation involving no adult participation, and the higher percentages of non-standard features in her speech were undoubtedly influenced by her age as well as by the absence of an adult participant.

TABLE 13
PERCENTAGES OF NON-STANDARD FEATURES, BY CHILD

Child	BS	MJ	AP	GJ	JD
Age	6	10	10	10	10
unmarked plural	55	8	∅	11	7
unmarked third singular	100	81	75	80	85
no possessive suffix	25	86	no potential	12	8
multiple negation	100	94	71	64	88
potentials for all features	28	125	33	136	135
averages	75	34	33	25	24

TABLE 14

PERCENTAGES OF NON-STANDARD FEATURES, BY INTERVIEWERS

Interviewers	None	Negro male	White female	Negro female	Negro and White females	White male
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
unmarked plural	38	3	3	17	19	Ø
unmarked third singular	100	89	90	62	62	67
no possessive suffix	25	20	33	37	no potential	Ø
multiple negation	100	100	87	75	no potential	66
potentials for all features	34	35	183	128	27	50
averages	62	43	31	28	13	12

There are considerable differences in the average percentages of non-standard features in conversations involving a white interviewer as compared to those not involving one. The average percentage of non-standard features involving no white interviewer (columns I, II, and IV, Table 14) is 44%; for conversations involving a white interviewer (III, V, and VI) it is 20%. In addition, the only four non-standard possessive pronouns and the only two examples of non-standard embedded questions in the corpus occurred in the absence of any white interviewer.

On the other hand there is evidence that the particular white person present might make a great deal of difference in terms of realization of non-standard features. The average percentage of non-standard features in the children's speech was greater with a white female interviewer present than with a Negro female interviewer present (columns III and IV, Table 14). The white female interviewer was well known to the children and they appeared relaxed in her presence; at one point a child mistakenly addresses her using the name of the female Negro interviewer as was noted above. Undoubtedly this familiarity with the white female interviewer affects the speech of the children. We might speculate that this is reflected in their use of a higher percentage of non-standard features with her present than in the presence of the white male interviewer. When the latter was present an average of only 12% of the potential of non-standard features was realized (column VI, Table 14), as compared with 31% when the white female was present.

When the percentages of non-standard features used in situations with Negroes alone as interviewers (columns II and IV, Table 14), are compared with conversations with only white interviewers present (columns III and VI, there are also considerable differences evident. When with Negro interviewers alone, the children produced an average of 36% of the potential non-standard features; with white interviewers alone they produced 21%.

At least two factors may in part account for the low average percentage of non-standard features used by the children where both Negro and white females are present (column V, Table 14). First is the fact that there was no potential for two of the non-standard features, one of which (multiple negation) showed a high percentage of realization in all situations in which there was a potential for it. Second, the Negro female interviewer is the mother of the one child involved; she begins the interview by scolding the boy for bad behavior in school. This appears to have had an effect on the boy's performance and might well help account for the higher percentage of standard forms in his speech in this conversation.

The speech of BS, the youngest child in the conversations (Table 13), reflects a 75% occurrence of the four non-standard features, while the average for the other four older children is 28%. It must be noted again that this child took part in only one conversation, which involved no adult interviewer, and this fact as well as her age undoubtedly had some effect on her use of the higher percentage of non-standard features.

It can be suggested then, with the reservations noted above, that use of the four non-standard features considered varied depending upon the following factors:

1) Age of the child, with a higher percentage of non-standard features being used by the youngest child.

2) Presence or absence of adult interviewers, with absence of an interviewer correlating with a higher percentage of non-standard features.

3) Sex and racial characteristics of interviewer, with

a) presence of a white interviewer alone correlating on the average with a lower percentage of non-standard features and presence of a Negro interviewer alone correlating with a higher percentage.

b) presence of a "familiar" white female correlating with a higher percentage of non-standard forms than presence of a white male.

In spite of the relatively small sample in this study and the geographical distance involved in the comparison, the results noted above in terms of percentages of nonstandard features in the speech of black children in Washington are similar to those noted by Wolfram in his study of Detroit speech.[5] Three of the four features examined for the 10 and 11 year olds in the present study showed nonstandard realization within nine percentage points of those for Wolfram's lower working class black informants, ages 10-12, in Detroit. (The larger spread in percentages for possessive marker absence between the two studies may be due in part to the smaller number of potential realizations in both). The results of the comparisons are shown below.

TABLE 15

MEAN PERCENTAGES OF -Z ABSENCE AND MULTIPLE NEGATION

	Washington	*Detroit*
Third singular marker absence	80	81
Possessive marker absence	29	45
Plural marker absence	7	7
Multiple negation	81	90

[5] Walter A. Wolfram, A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech, (Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), pp. 150, 163.

The mean number of potential realizations of these features for each informant in the two studies were:

	Washington (5 informants)	*Detroit* (48 informants)
Third singular marker:	15	28
Plural marker:	60	83
Possessive marker:	6	7
Multiple negation:	13	15

Some Notes for the Classroom

The results of this study clearly support a number of suggestions previously advanced by several investigators. The nature of the context in which speech takes place, including factors such as topic, and race and age of participants in a conversation, cannot be overlooked as influences upon speech. An intimidating situation is likely to affect speech. The interview situation is often intimidating, and the black child may thus be less inclined to uninhibited speech in such a setting. He should not, as a result, be labeled "non-verbal" any more than the middle class child should be so labeled if he were less than verbose upon finding himself the sole representative of his generation at an adult cocktail party.[6]

It is likely that the speech characteristics noted for the children in this study of black children from a lower socioeconomic group in Washington, D.C. will be found in the speech of such children elsewhere. It has been noted that percentages of -Z suffix absence and of multiple negation in the speech of the children in this study are with one exception close to the percentages found by Wolfram in the speech of black children in Detroit. If it does turn out that this uniformity is widespread, it should assist educators in planning language arts programs for such children.

The childrens' productive as well as their receptive control of standard English should not be underestimated. Even with a category such as the third person singular suffix, which showed an average 84% absence for all children, we find in the speech of one child with a 91% absence of this suffix, such sentences as:

> we wen' on na thing da' *go* down and den *goes* right back aroun' (121 MJ)

Clearly the child is here utilizing alternately a standard with a nonstandard "zero" realization of the third singular marker. This alternation is common for other features in these conversations and implies a degree of productive as well as receptive control of standard English.

There is a wealth of readily accessible data on the language of the five black children in the Loman text in addition to that utilized in this paper. The tapes and transcriptions of these fourteen conversations, available at the Center for Applied Linguistics, are a rich source of further information about the language of these children. Further examination of these materials and others can help us better understand the characteristics of the language of black children and to work more effectively with them.

[6] Bereiter and Engelmann in **Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Pre-School** (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1966) have advanced the view that the lower socioeconomic group black child is "non-verbal" and even that he has an "illogical" language. These views have been effectively refuted by William Labov in **The Study of Nonstandard English** (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970).